

NAME OF PROJECT: *Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of WWII*

DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 29, 2011

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: New Westminster, BC

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Nellie Cavell

NAME OF INTERVIEWER: Raymond Culos

NAME OF VIDEOGRAPHER: Anna Wilkinson

TRANSCRIBED BY: Krystle Copeland

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PROJECT NOTE:

Please note that all interviews have been transcribed verbatim. The language in this transcript is as it was provided by the transcriptionist noted above. The project staff have not edited this transcript for errors.

ABSTRACT

Nellie Cavell was born Nellie Pitton in Monte San Vito in the Ancona province of Italy. Her father arrived in Canada first to establish a life for when Nellie and her mother, Maria arrived. When they came to Canada they moved to Paul River, BC where they stayed until Nellie was in grade four and then moved to Strathcona. Nellie's two sisters, Armida and Antonina were both born in BC. After finishing her schooling, Nellie began her first job as a stenographer with the Italian Consulate in Dr. Brancucci's Vancouver office. Nellie recounts her fond relationship with Dr. Brancucci, and explains that she did not share his fascist views although she did join the Ciccolo Roma when he asked her to. On June 10th, 1940, Dr. Brancucci came bursting into the office saying "*Siamo in guerra*" meaning we, Italy, are at war. He then proceeded to ask his staff, including Nellie, to burn some documents and papers in the building's furnace. Two days later, Nellie arrived at the office to find that it had been closed, and Dr. Brancucci and his family had been placed under house arrest. Nellie was told by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) that she was an enemy alien, and was forced to report monthly – a process which Nellie

describes as mortifying. She and her family members strongly considered themselves to be proud Canadians, and had no interest in fascist organizations.

INTERVIEW

NC: Nellie Cavell, interviewee

RC: Raymond Culos, interviewer

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 00:00:09]

RC: —interviewing Mrs. Nellie Cavell at her home in New Westminster. [Camera zooms in] And the title of our—of the project that we're going to discuss is the Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of World War Two. And Nellie, you don't mind if I call you Nellie through...

NC: Well, I wish you would. [Smiles]

RC: Nellie, uh, could you give us a little background uh where were you born and when please?

NC: Well I was born in Italy, in northern Italy in 1919.

RC: Well and uh, and um uh what was your mai— uh your maiden name?

NC: My maiden name? Now you ask me. [Smiles] Maiden name was, [looks up] Pitton.

RC: Pitton.

NC: Pitton.

RC: And that's P-i-t-t-o-n?

NC: Exactly.

RC: Yeah.

RC: So, uh I remember your, your, your father, but please tell me a little bit about Antonio.

NC: Well, my father was a very, very proud Canadian man. Naturalized Canadian who always went around with his naturalization paper in his pocket and you want to know why?

RC: Yes, of course.

NC: When he'd get around with his fellows having their beer, chatting away. Someone would inevit— inevitably call him a DP. A displaced person. So he'd whip out his naturalization paper and he says, "I'm Canadian and I can prove it. Can you?" [Extends hand out towards RC]

RC: Very good.

NC: I still have that piece of paper. It's worn thin.

RC: Yes.

NC: But he was a fierce Canadian who never forgot that he was Italian.

RC: Excellent.

NC: Yeah he was.

RC: Is it true that he uh um, before coming to Canada served in the Italian army during the First World War?

NC: Yes he did. Yes.

RC: Do you have any uh stories relating to the—

NC: The only story I have, and I just you know remember this from folklore you might call it. Um, that he romanced my mother while he was in the war. And, and somehow or other the families did not want them to get together. [Points fingers together] But one night he appeared at her doorstep with a fella with an accordion. Another one with something tooting [motions a horn playing] and he played. And romanced her by playing. And uh, eventually you know he won her heart. And that's how, how it went.

RC: I'm wondering what was your mother's name and maiden name?

NC: Her name was Montico. She came from quite a large family. Yes.

RC: Um, Maria Montico?

NC: Yes.

RC: And uh, uh, and she was from ah ah from the town—

NC: [Brid dai]

RC: [Brid dai].

NC: *San Vito Italia Mento.*

RC: Where you were born?

NC: I was born either there or San Giovanni. Because [unclear] which were next door to each other.

RC: Yes. And ah so Nellie, ah you arrived in Canada. Do you recall the year?

NC: Uh about 1921.

RC: And where did you land?

NC: Well we landed in, in Vancouver at the, I think it was the CN station at that time. I remember that. I remember seeing these great big glass showcases and in there chocolates. Chocolates, boxes of chocolate and my eyes just about popped out. That was my first memory of arriving.

RC: [unclear] of arriving in Vancouver? My gosh...

NC: Yeah. Yeah. Chocolates.

RC: Isn't that remarkable.

NC: Yeah.

RC: And ah, how did you get to Paul River from—

NC: Well, I don't know, somebody was there to meet us, if my father was there, I don't remember. I don't remember the trip there but we went by. Probably Union Steamship.

RC: Yes. Your father had arrived before?

NC: He had arrived ahead of us to make a home for us.

RC: Was that by a year or a few months perhaps?

NC: Maybe two years. Yes. Maybe two years.

RC: Did you recognize him?

NC: I can't remember 'cause I was only about two and half.

RC: Fine. And uh, and so how many years did uh the family stay in Paul River?

NC: Well, until I went into grade four. Grade four I would be maybe ten. My two sisters were born there. And we moved to Vancouver hoping to find fame and fortune. And my dad found a big depression. So we arrived in the depression. Was just starting and I went to school in Vancouver. And...

RC: Is that Strathcona?

NC: Oh yes, yes. I started off in grade four.

RC: Oh my.

NC: Yes.

RC: And uh, so you stayed with friends?

NC: Yes, we stayed with the Brandolinni's. Well known family at that time.

RC: And uh, did your dad break through and get a job or what...

[5:11.7]

NC: Well, he got whatever job he could at the time. Uh, I remember he was a fisherman for a few years. So, I think he got jobs as he could.

RC: Yes. Uh, so in with your education uh, once you graduated from Strathcona, what school did you attend?

NC: Well, I went to Grandview High school of Commerce. Because I wanted to be, well I wanted to be a stenographer. And I wanted to learn shorthand. And I wanted to learn to type. So that was the place to go. It was a commercial school.

RC: And were you pleased with uh your studies?

NC: Oh, absolutely I liked everything about it. I liked shorthand, to me was a new language. I'd come home proudly and show them [motions writing lines and makes scratching noise]. They were all letters I'd tell them and show them. The curves and everybody was amazed. [Nods]

RC: Was that pitman?

NC: Pitman short hand yeah.

RC: And ah—

NC: I don't think they teach it anymore.

RC: I wonder.

NC: No.

RC: Well there was a story related to uh the daily newspaper coming to your home and your father's reaction to that. When we arrived in Paul River that was one of the first things my dad did was give us a newspaper. My mother and me, and he said, "Learn English." So that meant that we had to learn it from the newspaper. [Laughs]

RC: Yes.

NC: But of course I learned it from kids around me you know. And I soon learned. So did she, she'd go to the store, she'd go like that and they would say "chicken" and she would say "chicken." She came home she learned a new word.

RC: It's that something.

NC: Yeah "chicken." You know, that sort of thing. She learned it.

RC: When, when you graduated from uh, from Vancouver School of Commerce you had a vision?

NC: Grandview. Yeah, that was the name.

RC: And you had a vision about what you wanted to be and where you wanted to work. Could you tell us about that?

NC: Well, I, I was thinking of that. You know, I was thinking of that. You know. I wanted always to work in the marine building. To me, that was the most beautiful building. And I wanted to work there, not only because of its beauty, but because where it was, right on the water you know?

RC: And uh—

NC: And I did eventually get to work there.

RC: Who gave you your first important uh, job?

NC: Well, my first important job was with the Vancouver vice Consulate. And Dr. Brancucci. And I don't know how I applied there. I don't know whether somebody came to me and said, "there's an opening at the Consulate, go and apply." Well, what did I know about Consulate business? But I went down. And I was hired. But I was green as green could be. I knew nothing.

RC: Well, um who was, who was there working for Brancucci at the time that you either knew or got to know? There was a staff.

NC: Well, at the same time as me, Grace Fabri was hired. She was hired we were both in the same position. Uh, she was hired because she was fluent in Italian. I was not fluent. And so, uh, she was there for that, I was there to work as a stenographer as a secretary. And the other person that was there was um—

RC: [unclear]

NC: Cleo Fiftorte. She was an Italian teacher. And I immediately joined her class. She formed some Italian classes, to which anybody could come. Not necessarily Italians, so I met quite a few people there that were not Italian all wanting to learn Italian. And that's where I learned Italian. The real Italian. I loved it.

RC: So, as you progressed with Brancucci. Uh, did you become uh, directly involved uh, in the social life of the Italian community?

NC: In the social life of the Italian community? Well—

RC: [unclear]

NC: Uh, I was, when I was aged 16 my mother enrolled me in the *Lega*. 'Cause she belonged and there I met a lot of people that I already knew plus some that I just met for the first time. Then, when I worked for the Italian Consulate I was uh, kind of pushed to join the [*Circola Roma*] which was, I guess was a fascist organization but the word fascist meant nothing to me.

RC: [unclear]

[10:07.6]

NC: And so I joined that. And it was a social club. Mainly social.

RC: And what did they do uh, that uh, is uh, oh, [Circola Roma] what was their purpose and what—

NC: Well, it was mainly, it was mainly social. But, as I looked back, it was also disseminating information about the fascisti. Because they were all fascist ladies.

RC: Yes.

NC: Yeah, but as I say, it didn't interest me one bit.

RC: No, and did you get to meet uh, W.G. Rocco about that time?

NC: Uh his wife was a member of our *Lega*. I met her there. I don't know if she was a member of *Circolo Roma*. *Circolo Roma* I remember there was Mrs. Fabri, Grace's mother, there was uh, Rose Puchetti, uh that's about all that I can remember.

RC: Yes.

NC: Of that group.

RC: And um—

NC: But I met the Roccas I did.

RC: There was uh, an occasion when uh you became uh an integral part of the Braccucci's uh agenda. And he would send you off doing things or do this or that.

NC: Yes, yes, he, I have to give him credit. He brought me along. He taught me a lot of things. He taught me a lot of the finer things that I was not familiar with. I was from a working class family I never went out in the world. I never met anybody noted or anything but since going to work there I was expected to go to all the formal and informal social events. So then I got to meet people. Then I got to see how people acted. How people behaved. I always behaved with my mouth closed and my ears open. [Smiles and points to ear] And uh, I got to see what went on, and pretty soon I was a different person. I will say. And Doctor Braccucci, I give him full credit for that.

RC: That's a wonderful memory.

NC: Yeah, really.

RC: And uh, there was an occasion when he invited you I think it was a New Year's party or?

NC: Uh, it was a New Year's Eve party, and he said that I should come, well, you know I didn't really want to go. Because I was out of my element. And—but anyhow he sent a taxi for me. S—Sammy Volenti. And he came and picked me up and we went up to Shaunessy to their home. And there were the Roccas. And the Fabris. I don't know who else. But uh, when I went and took my coat off and everything and walked around. And then I went into the kitchen to do something, and then I stayed there. I didn't have enough nerve to come out. [Laughs]

RC: [laughs]

NC: And so pretty soon Mrs. Brancucci came and she says, "Nellie, what are you doing here? Come out here." [Motions being pulled out of the room] You know. I sort of felt like the servant girl. You know. And so she came and got me and I went out. And socialized with them. Then, when the night was— we were there all night long and in the early hours of the morning Mr. Rocco said, "Nellie, we're going to go have breakfast in the Vancouver hotel." "Wow!" I said, "this is something." So, away we went to the Vancouver hotel and had breakfast at around 5 or 6 in the morning. And then they took me home. I guess my mother was worried about me. But I did phone in the night to tell them that this was going on and I wouldn't be home soon. But it was a wonderful night and I had a wonderful time and it was my very best job.

RC: Well, uh as the international scene warmed up, so to speak. Uh, your dad, uh, put his uh, put his self on the line by uh, by advocating for uh, uh you know the Canadian political way of life and he I believe said something.

NC: Yes, he said something at one of the banquets or dinners. He made some reference to the fascisti. Because, as I say he was a really, really strong Canadian, he really was. And ah, of course, the word got around to Dr. Brancucci, and he had him up—well he had me crying. He says, "you phone your dad." [Pointing finger] "And you tell him to get up here." And I was just shaking. I didn't know what it was all about, you know. Politics meant nothing to me. So I phoned him I says, "Papa you have to come up here, the Dr. Brancucci wants to see you." "What for?" I says, "I don't know." He says, okay, I'll be up there. So he came up there and Ms. Forte she says to Mr. Brancucci, "why are you making her cry? She has nothing to do with it." You know. But he was really hot. So my dad came in, he went in the office, he went home and that was it.

[15:19.6]

RC: And what do you think Brancucci might have said to your dad?

NC: Oh he might have said, "don't ever talk against the fascisti." That's all I can think of. Don't ever say those words again, but it didn't stop him.

RC: No, your dad was—

NC: No, he, he had his views.

RC: Yes.

NC: This is a free country and he felt he could say what he wanted to.

RC: Yes.

NC: I guess Dr. Brancucci thought that because I was working there, his daughter that he would not say these things.

RC: Yes. Um, when you mentioned the Circolo Roma, uh that was of course the uh ladies affiliate club to the men's [*Giulio Giordano (Giordani)*].

NC: Oh yes, it was.

RC: And ah—

NC: Yes it was.

RC: Do you remember that club at all and—

NC: Hardly at all. No.

RC: Yeah uh, because Brancucci would have been its patron or—

NC: Absolutely. Oh yes. I remember the words *Giulio Giordano* [Giordani]. And *Circolo Roma*, they were often spoken of in the office. So I'm sure they were you know joined at the hip.

RC: Yes. Well, um, so what I was going to say is that was your dad ever enticed uh, in any way to—

NC: Never. No, never.

RC: Yeah. But uh, some people like uh Rocco and others uh, um, found um I guess ah, ah way to express their uh feelings uh the *patria* you know. It's uh—

NC: Well, I think what it was was the charismatic character of Dr. Brancucci. Everybody flocked to him. Everybody. [says with emphasis and sits up in chair] And the women especially. He was good looking, he was ah, paid attention to you when you talked. He was smiling all the time. People loved him they just [swoops hands together motioning gathering] gathered.

RC: They gravitated to him.

NC: Yeah, they did. They really did. And I think that's why a lot of people wanted to be in his crowd.

RC: Yes. Um, well there—when the war broke out on Monday, June the 10, 1940.

NC: Uh, yes. [Says with a sigh]

RC: Can you tell me about your day?

NC: Oh my day began as usual. I went to work and by that time we had moved from the uh um, Dominion Bank building on the corner of Cambie there across from the [Ceneta] another old building, a lovely building. We moved to the marine building and there my dream came true. I went to the marine building. And we were way up high on the 12th or 14th floor. And I was happy there. On this particular morning I went to work. And all of a sudden and Dr. Brancucci wasn't at work. And the morning went on and the morning went on and finally he bursts through the door! *Siamo in guerra!* We are at war! [says with arm held out in a charging position] Well I said, "of course we're at war. I know we're at war." And then it struck me. It struck me that he meant that Italy was at war against the allies.

RC: Right, you thought that he was referring to Germany?

NC: Yeah, yeah.

RC: Or you thought that?

NC: I didn't know what to think. But I never thought that. So then, he said uh, to me and Grace and Cleo Fiforte. He says, "we have to go down and burn all these papers." So there we were

they had piled up a bunch of papers, documents, whatever. We went down on the elevator to the basement of the marine building. This great big furnace was there, and just [motions tossing papers into the fire with hands] threw in all these papers and watched them burn.

RC: Would those be like diplomatic papers or maybe lists of like—

NC: Who knows? Who knows.

RC: And you just—

NC: I just did as I was told. And then I came upstairs, and then we went home. And then we went in the next day. And the next day we found out that certain people had been arrested. And uh, Grace Fabri was always at the window, looking North West. I said, "Grace, what are you looking at?" She says, "Don't you know, my father has been interned. My father is down there in the immigration building." [Points down and then looks up at ceiling while holding face] Oh, well. In that time, that— from the day before they had arrested, I don't know how many but we saw them at the window there. And Grace was waving at them. And uh, that's how we knew that this thing had begun of arresting people.

RC: So, if the uh— did the RCMP come that on the Monday to—

NC: I never saw them.

RC: Okay, but somebody was there to—

NC: Yeah, somebody came soon.

RC: And uh—

NC: 'Cause I was told to go home.

RC: Oh, okay. So that's when putting the papers in the furnace.

NC: Yeah, yeah.

RC: What happened to Brancucci and Forte? Did uh Ms. Forte—

[20:27.7]

NC: Well uh, the second day when I went back and realized that the whole office had to close down, you know and everybody had to go away. My one concern was for my beautiful, Olivetti typewriter. Which had arrived from Italy a few months ago. It was my pride and joy. Nobody had an Olivetti. It was the very first one.

RC: Wasn't it electric?

NC: It was electric. And my first thought was what's going to happen to my machine? That's my machine! Who's going to get it? And then I thought now, what's going to happen to all my family that I've got you know. And uh, I went home and they were sort of under arrest. House arrest.

RC: Who was Nellie?

NC: Brancucci and Mrs. Brancucci and their two boys. Under house arrest. Because a couple of times they phoned my dad and he'd prepare a dinner for them that Sammy Volenti would come and pick it up. So, my father did, he had no bad feelings you know. And so, I remember that. [Clears throat] And then he looked after their little dog as well. I don't know what happened to the dog. I have no memory of that. And then uh, came the time that they were leaving the city. And so we had her, they were leaving from the CPR train tracks and he had phoned me and asked me to go down. When they were leaving. My father wouldn't let me. So I couldn't go. See, I was not 21 yet.

RC: Yes.

NC: I was not concerned that I had to join any of the fascist organizations. I knew that one, I didn't want to. Two, I was under 21 and my father would not allow me. [Says while counting on fingers.]

RC: Yes.

NC: So that's— I got out of it that way.

RC: So, when when uh Brancucci and his wife and boys were at the station, would that have been one two or three days following the uh—

NC: No, I think it was a little while. It might have been a few weeks. It was a little while. And uh, I can't say how long, but it was more than a few days.

RC: And do you know where they were headed?

NC: Well, they were headed for New York because that's Mrs. Brancucci's family was from there. The Bravos or the Bravis. A name similar to that. She was well known in New York. That's the last I heard of them.

RC: Right. And then Ms. Forte, uh she got away so to speak.

NC: Yes.

RC: And do you know where she—

NC: I thought that she went to Rome.

RC: But I have perhaps Argentina.

NC: We don't know that. I know that when I— when she surfaced again, to my knowledge she was in Rome.

RC: Yes. So—

NC: But I never had any written contact or anything after that. [Shakes head no]

RC: Uh, Angelo Branca. Uh, with my dad uh started the uh Vancouver Italian Canadian Vigilanc— War Vigilance Association.

NC: Oh. That was the name of it. War Vigilance.

RC: Yes. Do you remember that—

NC: I just remember a little bit about that. Yeah.

RC: Uh.

NC: And what were they vigilant about?

RC: Well they uh, professed their loyalty to King and Country.

NC: Oh, okay.

RC: And, and they Frank in particular wanted to be sure that the authorities didn't think all Italians were pro-fascist.

NC: Oh. Okay.

RC: Yeah.

NC: Okay, okay.

RC: At the meeting at the Hastings Auditorium.

NC: Yeah.

RC: So, Nellie at some point. Um, the authorities made contact with your family—you included. And uh said in effect you must report to the RCMP headquarters. Who among the family members had to go and do that?

NC: Just myself. [Points to chest] One, I was born in Italy, two I worked for the Italian Consulate. [Counts items on fingers] So I would imagine it was because I worked for the Italian Consulate. Because not everybody born in Italy, I don't think, they might have because I don't know who else had to go and register. But I know, I was mortified beyond words. Beyond words.

RC: Who did you go up there with?

NC: I went with your father! [Points to RC] And both of us were mortified.

RC: Yes, yes he arrived from Italy all those years before.

NC: Yeah, yeah.

RC: And uh, what was the experience when you went there—

NC: Well, as I say, I was I mean—

[25:24.4]

RC: [unclear]

NC: I was humiliated. I mean there was nobody more Canadian than me. Nobody. I couldn't sing Oh Canada! or God Save the King without breaking down halfway through. I still do that! I still do that. So, I was humiliated. [Says with emphasis] I was upset. I didn't want anybody to know. I didn't want anybody to see me going from, well I went from my work at the Catholic Children's Aid on 16th Avenue. I was able to, after the first time I went with your dad I went on my own and I went from 16th Avenue to Oak Street and took a Trolley up to 33rd and then walked up

that hill. I was so frightened somebody might see me that knew me. Because I felt that I was like a criminal.

RC: My gosh. [Says very quietly]

NC: Why were they asking me to report?

RC: Yes. And they didn't give you an explanation?

NC: No.

RC: What did they say or do you recall?

NC: I don't know. "You are an enemy alien." They said.

RC: Yes.

NC: Therefore you have to— we have to know where you are.

RC: And how often did you report?

NC: Once a month.

RC: Once a month.

NC: Yeah.

RC: [unclear]

NC: And I don't know actually for how long. I don't remember that.

RC: Uh, during the war your father uh, passed away I believe.

NC: Yes.

RC: When was that?

NC: I think it was 1943.

RC: 1943. [Says quietly] And ah, would he of uh, been concerned for you that you had to go. Or did you ever have that discussion?

NC: No, he said uh if that was the way it was I had to do it. You know that was the law of the land.

RC: Around the time of your dad's death, you joined uh or were appointed to a committee uh, of uh remembering the soldiers like—

NC: Oh yes, I do remember that. [Smiles]

RC: Could you tell us about that?

NC: Well, we met, we met at your mother's house. [Points to RC] You were there at the time. Yeah. [Nods] You were just a kid. And uh, we prepared packages to send to our Italians serving

in the war. And I forget what was in there. [Touches lips] Cigarettes mainly. And some goodies. Some sweets you know. And then we got letters back thanking us very much for remembering them, they were very pleased.

RC: So uh there was that situation where some Italians were uh interned and they had perhaps uh relatives, like sons or nephews, nieces that were serving in the Canadian armed forces.

NC: Exactly. Yes, exactly. And um, I don't know. But I will say that the Italians were treated a bit better than the Japanese. I don't know of any Italian who had any of his assets taken away from him like the Japanese were.

RC: I think that's correct for Vancouver.

NC: Because I don't remember that. I don't remember anyone saying, "They took my house. They took my car." No, I don't remember that. [Shakes head no]

RC: Um at the time, very few women uh were working women. Most uh were uh as Julie would say domestic engineers. In the home—

NC: Exactly.

RC: So when the men were interned, it must have been a ah terrible experience for them. Do you have any understanding of how they might have fared?

NC: Well, I think there were places where they were able to work. Took the men's place. But uh I can't remember much of that because I went to work soon after for the Catholic Children's Aid. There was an ad in the paper and thought I'll never find work because I'm an enemy alien. I

worked in the office of an enemy alien. Nobody will give me a job. But it so happened that I answered this ad and the secretary who was leaving to have a baby, knew me through my Italian Lodge Association. Her mother was a member. Mrs. Parone. And so, uh, her daughter, Vicki she recognized me because sometimes we had meetings at the member's homes and we had been to her mom's house. So uh, when she knew who I was she says, "Oh, Nellie" she says, "You should have this job." And so she recommended me and that's how I got the job. Otherwise I don't think I would have got a job anywhere. I really don't think I would have. And so uh, uh I worked there for umpteen years.

[30:30.6]

RC: Was that about the time uh, you were married or is that later?

NC: I got married later. Yeah. 19—

RC: 40s maybe? Something like that?

NC: Well, I got married quite a bit later. Yeah.

RC: And uh, soon you were thinking about the City Hall. Can you tell us about that?

NC: Well, the City Hall was after uh, had my first child. Richard. And I sort of retired from the labour force. But then after a while I thought I really wanted to do some work. And that was another place I wanted to work. Besides the Marine Building, the City Hall was another one. [Points in the air and then hand on chin] So I saw an ad in the paper saying that they were hiring secretarial staff. "Married women applications accepted" that was the first time that married women were accepted at City Hall in Vancouver. So I rushed up there, filled up this,

huge, huge thing. I came home and low and behold there was a phone call. They wanted me to come back and be interviewed. So, upon my interview they hired me. And my first job was uh, was in the uh department of— the city clerk. [Says while pointing at RC] And uh, they hired me on the basis of the fact that I did work for the Catholic Children's aid and knew the routine of uh, payment for children in care.

RC: Uh, oh yes.

NC: Uh, every district had to pay for their children in care. In the province. And I had to type out these huge, huge financial statements. [Measures arms out wide] So, I got so I could do them with my eyes closed. That's where I learned to type really well. Type numbers without looking. So, they hired me on that basis. So there that job, paid off in this one. Then I finished my two or three weeks, went home. In time they called me back again to the same department. And then low an— that was another job I wanted to work in the Mayor's office! [Points at RC and laughs] Would you believe it? I had all these ambitions. And they phoned me. They had an opening in the Mayor's office. The Mayor's secretary was going to be off for a few weeks and they wanted me to work there. Well, I was trembling. I was really shaking. My father, my mother and my family, they were all so proud of me.

RC: Yes. [Says softly]

NC: I was going to work for the Mayor. So I went there, reported there and it was quite a nice job. Uh, a day or two after I was there, the Mayor took sick. It was Mayor Hume. And so, uh, uh, I forget the name of this, this vice Mayor, whatever they called her. She was the head of uh, of um, typing school. I just can't remember her name off hand. But it was a very popular school.

RC: Sproatshaw?

NC: [points to RC] Sproatshaw. Her name was Mrs. Sprot. So anyhow, I went to work for her. The first few days that I worked for the Mayor he dictated you know he'd say, "well, tell them this, tell them that and let me do the letters." [Motions writing out by hand] I didn't mind that, I was good at that. But when it came to Mrs. Sprot, she was a teacher. And she reeled off the letters. The punctuation, the paragraphs, everything. So it was a different deal. I had to work hard for her.

RC: Yes.

NC: Then that finished and then I got called again for the Mayor's office. This time, his secretary was there. He was a man. And he would dictate the letters to me. He had had an eye operation so he couldn't see very well. I had to read the letters to him. And then he dictated the answer. So that was very interesting. I got to hear a lot of inside things about which I could never, never talk. But it was a wonderful, wonderful job. So I did work in the Mayor's office. I worked at City Hall, and I worked at the Marine Building. [Smiles] That's all my ambitions were.

[35:14.0]

RC: Isn't that wonderful.

NC: Yeah.

RC: So, one of your two sons works for the City of Vancouver.

NC: He did, that's my second son. He started off as a rod man. How he got his job is also a story. He was given the name at City Hall by Bill Durmondy. Who also was a City Hall employee. He says, "You tell Kevin to go and see this man." So, Kevin went there bright and early one day and

uh, the clerk said, "he's not at work today. You'll have to come back another day." So his— as Kevin was heading off she said, "what did you want to see him about?" He said, "I want to see him to get a job as, as a rod man." "Oh," he says, "That's not the person you should see. You should see this guy." [Laughs and points] Sent him there, he got the job. So he worked his way up from the lowest of the lows to as high as he could go in the engineering department. He couldn't go any higher because he did not have the education beyond high school.

RC: Well, that was a wonderful story.

NC: Yeah, that was a wonderful story. Yeah.

RC: And, and, and Richard, your your oldest son, uh he's had quite an academic career. Can you tell us about that?

NC: Oh, yes. He went to University of British Columbia and got his, his uh Bachelor of Arts. Then he went to Toronto and he got his Master's. And then in Toronto he got his PhD. So, he got all that education and then he started off teaching. Various places. And ended up at University of British Columbia where he has had a terrific career. He's a tenured Professor. He travels all over the world giving lectures. At all the prestigious universities. And how they got onto him and they hear him speak and they'll go right up to him and say, "would you give a, a seminar at our university?" And he would go. So he's travelled all over the world. He is currently going to Germany to teach there.

RC: Isn't that remarkable.

NC: Yeah.

RC: How proud you must be.

NC: Yeah. And all the while travelling and he learned to speak Italian beautifully. He wrote two books. He's an expert on Marshall McLuhan.

RC: The media—

NC: And uh, uh, there he is.

RC: And he taught at uh, at the University of Padua for a while?

NC: And that was a first for a Canadian. A Canadian professor teaching Canadian literature at an Italian university. And we went to visit him there. He took us through the university. He showed us the spot where uh, Galileo taught. And he told us, he taught here at this sort of [motions a circular movement with hand up high] a lectern. But he said, when he first started, he was at a desk. And he was a little, short man. They couldn't see him. So one night the students got together. One night they built him this tall [laughs and measures the height] lectern to speak from. [Laughs]

RC: Isn't that a wonderful story.

NC: And then we saw the place where uh, the doctors learned. It was a big round [motions round shape with arms and hands] space up there. And there was the operating table. And they were there to learn. You know. We looked down on that spot. Where Galileo taught.

RC: [unclear] history.

NC: Yeah, I thought that was thrilling. Thrilling. Yup.

RC: So, in our community in Vancouver. Uh, while you were a mother and ah working and a wife, did you also uh, keep active in the Italian Ladies Association?

NC: Oh, always. I was a full-time member. I was, I think I took nearly every position that I was capable of doing. And uh, I was even President once. Yes. Yes. I did all those things.

RC: And anything about the Ladies uh Auxiliary to the Sons of Italy that you particularly remember? The work they did or?

NC: Well I remember that they were an auxiliary which did help the men. When they put on a banquet, often the ladies would cook the sauce. Your mother would make the ravioli, which we would all help her with. And she made thousands of ravioli. In fact I'll tell you a story about that. We had made the ravioli one night and your mother had put them in the basement to keep them cool. I mean there were platters of them. The next night we went to the hall and of course we all helped. And your mom was there and we had all these trays of ravioli when we were— you can imagine the kitchen was a hot bed. Steam was everywhere from the pots. Cooking you know. So we went to put ravioli in the pot, and they were all stuck to the platters. [Pause] Stuck to the platters! Well, your mother, I thought she was going to burst into tears. In fact, I think I did. So I said to her, "Never mind, Fil. We'll do it one by one. Just tell the people out there we're going to be late." One by one we unstuck them. Put them in the pot and avoided that crisis. But I'll never forget it.

[41:03.8]

RC: You were a God-send to my mother that's for sure!

NC: I'll never forget it. [Shakes head] I'll never forget it. [Laughs] And they were the best ravioli. The best! [Smiles]

RC: There's a wonderful story I believe connected with your mom. And her *sugo* or her sauce, and she used to keep it under lock and key.

NC: My mother was paranoid. My mother was paranoid. She made the sauce buckets of sauce. She kept it in the basement. And wouldn't let anybody in the basement go near it or anything like that. And when we brought it to the hall. She had to guard it, until they start dishing it out. She was so paranoid about it. Again, the sauce was delicious. My mother was a pro.

RC: Your mother was a great cook.

NC: Yes. She was. So was my dad. So was my dad. Yup.

RC: They would work uh—

NC: They would work banquets, yeah. Yeah they did.

RC: [unclear]

NC: Yeah.

RC: And your mom also was a great uh, social uh, socialite. And at the banquets she would sing?

NC: Yeah. She and a few other ladies. They always sang in harmony. That was the highlight for me. And any occasion where these ladies were, there was Mrs. um, golly.

RC: What like—

NC: Antionetta, Antionetta Pistore.

RC: Pistore.

NC: And my mother. Teresa Petevello. And I forget who else. Auntie Marie. [Points to RC]

RC: Yes, Auntie Marie.

NC: Yeah. And my Auntie Marie. And they sang this beautiful, old-fashioned harmony. And for me, that was always the highlight. When the ladies sang.

RC: Uh, your sister Armita also enjoys signing. Can you tell me about your two sisters please?

NC: Well, they uh, they uh never joined the *Lega* except Armita my second sister; she joined in later on in years. And is a very active member. Antonita did not join it. She moved out to Burnaby. Started raising her family. She had four daughters and was too busy to be involved in clubs. But Armita played the accordion. And often played at small social gatherings. She joined the choir at the church and she was more involved with the singing aspect.

RC: She once told me about uh, attending a picnic on Bone Island with the Giulio Giordani.

NC: Yes.

RC: That they sponsored.

NC: Yes.

RC: Uh, were you there at that—

NC: I keep looking at that picture and I keep looking at that group picture and sometimes I say, that must be you. [Points] But then, [pause] I say no. I can't have been at that. I didn't belong to it. I don't know if my sisters did. But they were there.

RC: What kind of uh ah, a group uh attended do you think.

NC: Well, they were all people I knew. Nearly all of them.

RC: Uh hmm. Yes. So—

NC: Yeah, a disparate group. You know from all over. The Italians, but I knew most of them.

RC: Yeah 'cause Brancucci I believe uh was there.

NC: I have no doubt that he was there. He would be there front and centre.

RC: And ah, what what— the year you were president of the uh ladies uh group, did you have a particular um uh program that you uh put forward or?

NC: No, but I do remember putting on the banquet. And I thought that I didn't have too much support. It was at a time when things were not so good. There was not much money around and I thought. The banquet's going to be a dud.

RC: Uh hmm.

[45:11.6]

NC: Well, a few of my friends. The um, the um, Lucy Benotto. Her gang, her gang heard about it. That I was a bit depressed. Well if they didn't go out and solicit people to come to the banquet, they succeeded so much that it was one of the better banquets. It was wonderful and I have them to thank for it.

RC: And uh, would that have been at the Hastings Auditorium?

NC: No, it wasn't. No it wasn't. It was at Our Lady of Sorrows.

RC: Oh.

NC: Yes.

RC: And ah—

NC: Now, I can't tell you who catered it. I do not remember.

RC: So, you mentioned ah, a little earlier that you actually went to Padua. At the time Ricky was teaching there. Um, had your parents ever returned to Italy?

NC: Not. And the thing is that my mother would not return. Because people would be going to Italy they'd be coming back. What they did at San Vit was they did this, they built that. You should see how they have the things here. And she didn't want to hear that. She did absolutely

not want to hear that they had done all these progress. She wanted it to be the same. So would would not go back and see these changes.

RC: Isn't that remarkable.

NC: She never wanted to go. Never.

RC: And when you went back did you connect with say, first cousins? Or—

NC: Yeah I was so thrilled. And they were so thrilled to see us. I went the first time with the [Yolonda]. Our cousin Yolonda. It was the first time she had been back since she married my cousin Reno. And she went back because her mother was dying. And so, uh we got together and said well we can't let her go alone. Nellie, you have to go with her. I was thrilled. This was my opportunity to go to Italy. And so, uh, all of my friends had been. So we went and I was thrilled to bits. My family all welcomed me. And brought me around and exhibited me to all the relatives, you know how they do? [Laughs]

RC: Yeah. [Laughs]

NC: And I was from America. You know how?

RC: Yes.

NC: And my sister Antonina used to hate that. When she heard them say, "you're from America." "I'm from Canada!" [Laughs] You know. But for them, America was all of America you know. And so, uh I did enjoy my visit in my town. I did enjoy seeing the architecture where if you went down the street you'd see all the windows shuttered and you'd think there's nobody

home. But it was the back of the houses that had the garden. They'd have a pool. They'd have everything in the back. You did not see that from the front. Yeah. Until they started building new homes, and then they had gardens in the front. So that was all new to me.

RC: That was a wonderful experience.

NC: Yeah, it was. It was. I was thrilled to bits. And when I came home from that trip, which I went alone with Yolanda my sisters were quite, quite jealous. And they said, well, we have to go. And uh, when we go you have to come with us. So my sister, the youngest one Antonita she never worked outside the home. She went and got herself a job and I think it took her five years to accumulate the money to go. Armita was always working she always worked. So, five years later we took off. And we went to Italy and they were overjoyed. Overjoyed. Yeah.

RC: During your community service work, uh did you ever connect with uh, the Catholic uh, Church. Sacred Heart in particular? Did you ever uh [unclear]? Were you a parishioner there?

NC: I was a parishioner there. I was an active parishioner. We had a club called a CYO: Catholic Youth Organization. But I don't remember doing any volunteer work as such. I was younger at the time.

RC: They had the bazaars and shows.

NC: Oh, the bazaars. We all worked at the bazaars. True, true.

RC: And uh, [pause.] So, when you think about the wonderful things that have happened during your lifetime, what memories do you carry with you from say Union Street or the Strathcona area?

[50:13.8]

NC: Well I remember that we were all uh, a very shall I say [incomenico] group. We played with everybody. Black, white, Japanese, Chinese. We had a huge Japanese community not far from us. We had China Town. They all went to Strathcona School. We were all friends. We all invited them to our birthday parties. In fact, we had one black boy. And uh we invited him to a party once. He wouldn't come in my house. He wanted to stay on the porch. He says, "No," he says, "I'm not used to going in people's houses." I said, "You're welcome why are you—" I couldn't understand why he didn't want—. I guess it was because he was black and maybe in some houses he was made to feel inferior. But in our house he was welcome.

RC: Earlier you mentioned, or made a reference to the Japanese being interned. There was ah, a Japanese grocery store person. George Omei. Omei. Do you remember?

NC: I do remember Omei. That was a gathering place for us. For the kids you know. We'd hang out around the corner there. The boys and the girls. Watch the people going by. Those that smoked would go in and would be able to buy one cigarette.

RC: [laughs]

NC: One cigarette. If you didn't have the money, Omei wrote your name down in his little book. He knew you'd come back and pay him. And I know Omei was a very, very integral part of the community and he knew how to speak Italian. [Smiles] So there you are, that was Omei.

RC: Did he uh, was he uh invited to one of the Prior Street reunions do you recall?

NC: That I can't recall. Uh, who was invited there was [Seiup]. Now I think he was Japanese. And he hung around with us. He was one of our friends. I believe he was interned. He went back east and he never came back. But he kept in touch with certain people. And so I believe he was invited to one of the reunions. I can't remember which one.

RC: And uh, I— I just wanted to ask uh, perhaps one or two further questions. And one has to do with Angelo Branca who was the first lawyer of Italian extraction.

NC: Yes.

RC: Uh, do you recall uh anything about him that uh is memorable to you?

NC: Well, no I just remember him as sort of a supersized person. You know. Because he was sort of, he was kind of the head of the Italians. You know. Everybody went to him. He was everybody's lawyer. And everybody respected him. And uh, um, he was the leader amongst the Italians.

RC: Uh, when you mentioned uh, Grace Fabri. Uh, her father Allemondo—

NC: Yes, Allemondo, that's right.

RC: Was a sculptor.

NC: Yes.

RC: Do you uh, did you ever meet him or?

NC: I met him, yes. I met him. I don't know much about him because you know as I say those people were, I thought above me. I scarcely spoke to them. When we were out socially. It took me a long time to get over that. To find that I was equal to him. But at that time. I didn't feel equal.

RC: Well, he and uh, uh, Carlo Moregga were the two well-known sculptors—

NC: Of course.

RC: And uh, and their works are around the city. And were you ever ah connected with anything that they did. Did you ever see any of their pieces—

NC: Well only I believe at uh the Lion's Gate Bridge.

RC: Yes.

NC: There's, were they the lions that he did?

RC: At the south side.

NC: That's right. Did he not do something on the Berrard bridge as well? Did he not do—
[makes large square outline with hand]

RC: Um.

NC: The archway in the Berrard Bridge. He did something—

RC: I'm not certain of that but he may well have. I know he did uh the [President Harding] and—

NC: Yes.

RC: [unclear] Vancouver.

NC: Yes. George Vancouver and Harding in Stanely Park. Yes that's right.

RC: I suppose I was really leading you to something that I think you might be aware of. And there was a bust of Mussolini done uh that was uh apparently in Brancucci's office at the time that the war broke out.

NC: Gee, I can't even remember that.

RC: Uh, 'cause it's now sitting in the Vancouver archives.

NC: How did they get it? [Asks in a surprised tone]

RC: Well—

NC: I mean I would like to know what happened to the things. Especially my typewriter! I want to know where it is. [Laughs]

RC: That's wonderful. Yeah. That I don't really know.

NC: So, how did they get that bust? In the Vancouver archives.

RC: I think the RCMP must have given it to them.

NC: Oh, okay.

RC: What was in that office now on the walls and so on, and the decor? When you—

NC: I don't remember.

RC: Yeah. Obviously an Italian flag and so on...

NC: Pictures, pictures of his family I remember were on his desk. But I'd go in there and take dictations and go out. Oh, you want to hear a funny story? As I told you, everybody flocked to Dr. Brancucci. Especially the woman—the women. So there was one particular woman. A nice, respectable married woman, but she kind of took a shine to my boss. And so she had an appointment to come in to see him on this particular day and he says, "Nellie" he says, "Mrs. So and so's coming in this afternoon. If she shuts the door behind her, I want you to come in and tell me, give me a message. Make it up. Anything you want. And then when you go out, make sure you leave the door open." And so, I had to do that she did indeed shut the door. And I did go in there and I said, Mr. So and so called, he will be a bit late for his appointment. He said, "Thank you Nellie." I went out and I left the door open. [Laughs] I thought that was intriguing.

[56:46.3]

RC: Thank you very much for that. [Laughs]

NC: I love that story. And it's true.

[Camera fades out at 56:56.0]

RC: I'd like to make another reference to the time you were working at the vice consulate's office. Uh, what did you, what do you think you learned that made you grow as a person from Dr. Brancucci?

NC: Well, I learned that everybody wasn't alike. That there were really strata's or levels in society. I learned that the Fabris were one level. And the Pittons were another level. We were working class. And that was our class. But I also learned that I could be of the same level as the Fabris and the Brancuccis. All it took was a little education, and a little bit of looking around and watching what went on.

RC: Did Brancucci help you with that education?

NC: Yes he did. He often gave me little— but he did it in such a nice way, that's why I admired him. He, he never made me feel that he was telling me actually how to behave. One thing I do remember though, because I was so shy around him and his friends. He used to come to Sacred Heart Church and of course that was my church. When we came out of mass everybody would flock around Dr. Brancucci but not me. I was always on the outskirts. So one day he took me aside and he says, "Nellie" he says, "you don't have to feel shy." He says, "if you want to come and say hello after mass" he says, "come. Don't go off in the corners." He was telling me that I should be amongst those that said, hello, good morning, how are you. I learned that. And those were the things he taught me. Ever so carefully. Yeah. And then he would also help me with my Italian.

RC: [unclear]

NC: You know, if I, I spoke English in the office. But sometimes I had to speak Italian when he called me in and he had somebody in there to whom he was speaking Italian. And when he went to to talk to me, I was expected to answer in Italian. So sometimes, he would gently correct me. And I would remember.

RC: Yes. You know during those years, especially prior to the war because that's when he was in office in Vancouver, um did you ever sense that he was anything but a diplomat in terms of politics? Did he push the fascist thing?

NC: Not to me. Not to me, except to ask me to join the Circolo Roma. Which meant nothing to me. I joined it. But he was a really brilliant man. And very well read. Very well read.

[1:00:04.2]

RC: Uh, during his tenure, uh the Lega d' Italia or the Italo Canadese as it was known then.

NC: Yes.

RC: Was run by Bruno Girardi and then Alberto uh, Boccini.

NC: Boccini. [Smiles]

RC: And his wife I think was the pianist.

NC: Pianist, yes she was.

RC: What do you remember about the newspaper or that?

NC: Well, I remember that I liked the newspaper I used to read it all the time. It helped me with my Italian. Uh, I thought Boccini was a bit of a character. You know, he was, he reminded me a bit of [unclear] Marx. You know how [unclear] used to, yeah like that. [Points at RC] He was always hitting somewhere. And he was a funny little man. I really liked him. I liked him a lot.

RC: Yeah. And yet ah, his rhetoric you know was ah incredibly—

NC: I know.

RC: Uh, pro-fascist.

NC: I know.

RC: Yeah.

NC: But I liked him, the man.

RC: And Bruno Girardi.

NC: And Bruno Girardi was a friend of mine.

RC: Yeah.

NC: So.

RC: Yeah.

NC: That's the way he was.

RC: Yeah. And ah—

NC: As I say, fascisti meant nothing to me. The word fascist meant nothing to me. I knew nothing about politics. We never discussed politics at home. You know how some people talk politics at home?

RC: Uh hmm.

NC: We never talked politics around the table. We talked mainly about food. That's what we talked about. [Laughs]

RC: Your dad was a cook, your mom was a cook.

NC: That's right. But we never talked politics, so what did I care about politics. About fascisti.

RC: Yeah, because you were very young at the time.

NC: I was very, as I say I was about 17 when I graduated from high school I graduated a bit early. And that was my first job.

RC: Uh, this is ah, I guess this is of interest to me personally, when all this happened in June 1940, did you get the last paycheck, or what happened there?

NC: Gee, that I don't know if I did get. I don't think I did. I think they still owe me, I'm going to I should write to the whoever's in charge in Italy and say, "hey, you owe me some severance here. You didn't give me warning." [Laughs] That's true.

RC: Thank you very much. Yeah. Thank you Nellie.

NC: Okay. [Smiles]

[Camera fades out at 1:02:21.8]

[End of interview]